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ABSTRACT

The Head Start Family Impact Project involved a one-year study of 81 single mothers and their children from the Hennepin County Head Start Program. This program was planned to test the notion that parent-child interaction in the context of Head Start would be the most beneficial form of parental involvement. An assessment session, which measured variables in the parent/family as well as in the child, was conducted in October and again in April of the Head Start year. The initial assessment indicated that the Head Start families are similar to other families, but that the mothers tend to underestimate their child's self-worth and the families tend to display patterns considered dysfunctional. The results from the second assessment session indicated that these problems can be alleviated with an increase in parental involvement. For instance, parents at the end of the study had increased their estimate of their children's competence and social acceptance. Furthermore, the families involved in the study became less dysfunctional during the study. The results of this study indicate the significance of parental involvement in the Head Start Program and suggest the need for future research. One table and one figure are included. (JS)

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Involving Parents in Head Start

by Robert K. Leik and Mary Anne Chalkley

The Head Start program, which began in the 1960s, has become a successful national attempt to overcome some of the educational disadvantages faced by children of poverty. Although research findings are mixed regarding purely intellectual or academic gains (gains in IQ, for instance) there is strong and consistent evidence of long-term gains for children who have gone through such a program. These gains include less need for remedial school work, less getting into trouble, higher rates of completing high school, and higher rates of employment after school.

Comparisons across various preschool curricula indicate that the curriculum per se makes little difference; being in such a program is what matters. Funding limitations mean that too few children who could benefit are able to participate, but those who do, seem to have better life chances as a result. The evidence suggests that something about attitudes and beliefs gets molded in a way that has lasting effects. Since the family is the primary milieu of the very young child, it is important to ask whether involving parents as well as children could enhance those benefits which have already been demonstrated.

Since its beginning, Head Start program goals have included involving parents in the program. Just what involvement means, however, and whether it has any favorable impacts, has been less clear. For most programs, parental involvement has meant helping the Head Start staff with routine tasks such as serving food or riding buses with the children. The Head Start Family Impact Project was planned specifically to test the notion that joint parent-child interaction in the context of Head Start would be the most beneficial form of parental involvement. The initial data suggest some validity for this notion. There seem to be important benefits from parent involvement with Head Start that were not previously envisioned.

Design of the Project

The Head Start Family Impact Project began in the late Summer of 1986 in cooperation with Parents in Community Action (PICA), the Hennepin County Head Start program. Because over 80 percent of PICA families are single parents who are female, only that type of family was sampled. All told, eighty-one Head Start mothers and their children participated in two sets of assessments. In addition, twenty-one mothers and their children who were on the PICA waiting list also participated in the assessments as control families. Of these 102 families, 42 were white, 40 were black, and 20 were American Indians. The assessments occurred early in the Head Start year (October 1986) and again at the end of the Head Start year (April 1987).

The assessments measured variables in the parent and the family as well as in the child. Mothers answered questions that supplied most of the data. Personal psychological variables were examined in the mother, such as her self esteem and sense of control in her life. The mother's evaluation of her own child's behavior and capabilities was assessed through questions about the child's competence and social acceptance and about the child's independence. Other questions gave a measure of the family's functioning, particularly of family cohesion and adaptability and of family coping strategies. Family stress, family resources and family support within the community were measured. Demographic information was also requested, such as the size and composition of the family. In addition, the children were interviewed individually using a picture-based rating scale that measured their own sense of competence and social acceptance.

Head Start families were assigned to one of two treatment groups: enriched or regular. Regular meant that mothers were free to participate in Head Start as they wished, with no specific requirements or encouragements. The enriched group participated in special activities throughout the Head Start year. These included 1) two support groups for the mothers, 2) three computer games designed both to encourage interaction between the mother and her child and to teach the child about decision-making and the use of resources, and 3) two parent-child group activities focusing on role playing and games to play together.

For the computer sessions, the mother was first taught how to run the system, then she taught and worked with her child. The sessions included making a simple color drawing, playing a birthday planning game (here the child negotiated a maze, making decisions which limited or expanded future decisions), and a computer treasure hunt that emphasized systematic search procedures. In most instances, the child ended up sitting on mother's lap in order to operate the keyboard. The role playing and game

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sessions emphasized each mother and child sharing with other mothers and children in small groups.

Although it was intended to have equal numbers of families in each of the three assessment groups, a number of factors made this impossible. The final breakdown of the participants was thirty in the enriched group, fifty-one in the regular group, and twenty-one in the control group.

Table 1. TYPE OF FAMILY FUNCTIONING IN HEAD START FAMILIES AND IN MIDDLE CLASS NORMATIVE FAMILIES (in percents)

Classification	Head Start Families	Middle Class Families
Extreme	28.8	9.5
Mid-range	33.6	40.0
Balanced	37.3	50.7

Initial Assessment

How did the Head Start families compare with "normal" middle class families at the beginning of the Head Start year? All the Head Start families in our assessment groups were fairly young (the average age of mothers was twenty-eight), they were poor (a median income of $531 a month), but reasonably well educated (74 percent had graduated from high school or earned a GED certificate). The families were atypically large. One third had three or more children and nearly half had two or more adults.

On the average, the Head Start mothers were no different from "normal" middle class mothers in terms of self esteem and sense of control in their own lives. Their children, also, scored no differently on average in measures of competence and social acceptance from middle class children who had taken the same tests.

Mothers tended to rate the independence of their children somewhat lower than did parents of children attending the University of Minnesota nursery school. However, the Head Start mothers were more satisfied than the University of Minnesota mothers with their children's independence. Both the Head Start mothers and the control group mothers rated their children significantly lower on competence and social acceptance than the children did themselves.

The Head Start families appeared to be quite comparable in health and well being to other families of preschool age children. Typically, they had fewer resources, but more support from their immediate family and friends. The Head Start families had experienced more stress than middle class families, but they did not differ in terms of family strength, and there was only one difference in terms of coping strategies: Head Start families turned to religion less often.

Family functioning was evaluated in terms of cohesion (family togetherness) and adaptability (the amount of structure and rules in the family). For these measures, it is assumed that extremes on either end of the two dimensions have negative consequences for the family. Too much cohesion indicates an enmeshed family while too little cohesion indicates a disengaged family. Similarly, too much adaptability indicates a chaotic family while too little adaptability indicates a rigid family. Families are classified as *extreme* when they are extreme on both dimensions, *mid-range* when they are extreme on one dimension but within the acceptable range on the other dimension, and *balanced* when they are within the normal range of both dimensions. Both the Head Start families and the control families differed markedly from reported norms on these measures. Table 1 compares the Head Start families with the middle class family norms.

It is evident that in most respects Head Start families are quite similar to other families, but that the mothers tend to underestimate their child's self worth and the families tend to display patterns considered dysfunctional.

Extent of Mothers' Involvement in Head Start

Setting aside the fifteen or so hours required for the enrichment activities, mothers in the enrichment group invested a mean of 25.9 hours in Head Start activities over the six months of the study. The range was from only two hours to an impressive 153 hours. When time spent in the enrichment activities is added to these other hours, the mothers in the enriched group averaged about 1.6 hours per week in Head Start activities.

In contrast, mothers in the regular group invested a mean of 19.4 hours, with actual hours ranging from 0 to 154. Overall, these mothers averaged less than one hour per week throughout the six months of study, or about half of the time put in by the enriched group.

It is possible, of course, that mothers in the enriched group agreed to be in that group because they had more time available. However, we doubt that such an explanation covers the very large difference documented. It would appear that committing themselves to the enriched program induced these mothers into taking a much more active part in the entire Head Start program. If so, this is a very important finding.

Did Involvement Make a Difference?

Assessments made in April, at the end of the Head Start year allowed us to examine the changes in mother, children, and family functioning that had occured during that year.

Debbie Frenette and son Micael play "itsy-bitsy spider," often a group activity for the parents and their children.

Melrecia Wright is learning to use the computer with guidance from her mother Hope.

Competence and Acceptance. On average, the Head Start children increased in their sense of their own competence and social acceptance during the year. Parents, however, in both the enriched and regular groups, increased their estimate of their children's competence and social acceptance even more; so much so that by the end of the year, the children and their parents were in basic agreement. By comparison, the control group mothers did not increase their evaluations of their children's abilities. In fact, control mothers' assessments actually declined slightly, with the result that they ended the year with an even greater underestimation of their own children then occured in the first assessment. It seems, therefore, that involving mothers in Head Start helps them see their children more positively and more as the children actually see themselves. Such an improvement in parental assessment could have great long-term consequences for the child, perhaps encouraging the child to aspire to greater achievement.

Family Functioning. Most of the families initially classified as extreme in both Head Start groups and in the control group became less extreme during the study year. However, other families became extreme during that same time. Enrichment seemed to have little to do with any move away from dysfunction, but the number of families who moved into extreme forms of functioning during the year differed greatly in the three study groups. The net reduction of extreme family types in the control group was a modest 25 percent. In the regular Head Start group the net reduction was 40 percent. And in the enriched group the net reduction of extreme families was 78 percent! Only two of the families in the enriched group (out of thirty) were classified as extreme by the end of the Head Start year. Thus, Head Start, especially in conjunction with parent involvement, may provide a buffer that reduces the chances of family functioning being at risk. Figure 1 shows these changes in graphic form.

Some Racial and Cultural Differences

With only forty-two white, forty black, and twenty American Indians in the entire sample, it is not possible to separate out the effects of involving parents in Head Start for each cultural group with any statistical confidence. However, we did discover marked differences between these racial groups in how the parent, child, and family variables related to each other. For example, the mother's self esteem was closely related to the amount of cohesion in the family for whites and American Indians, but not for blacks. On the other hand, for whites and blacks, the family's cohesiveness in the fall corresponded closely with the child's independence in the spring, but for American Indians this relationship was reversed. We are currently exploring the possible implications of these differences.

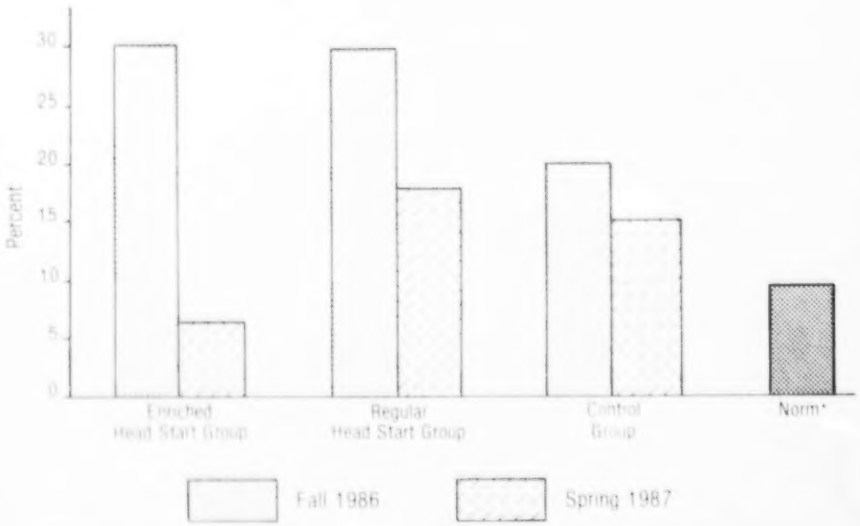
Policy Considerations

Given the cultural variations in our findings, it may be that no single policy for parental involvement will be equally satisfactory for all cultural groups. Of course we need much more evidence before drawing extensive policy conclusions. However, our data from this study alone do speak to several policy issues.

1) It is apparent that Head Start does affect the parent as well as the child.

2) An obvious corollary to the significance of parental involvement is that not all

Figure 1. CHANGE IN EXTREME FAMILY TYPES (in percents)



* Based on FACES (Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scales) in D.H. Olson et. al. Family Inventories (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, 1985).

types of involvement are equally significant. Our research focused on the importance of the parent and child interacting in a setting where each would have the opportunity to perceive the other as competent. The enrichment activities were designed to meet this special need. Those families that participated in these activities were the ones that showed the most significant positive changes in family functioning. Although the parents in the regular Head Start program had some similar opportunities (such as working as aides in the classroom), systematic efforts to offer this special kind of parental involvement need to be encouraged.

3) Parental involvement may not be the only type of involvement that is appropriate for Head Start programs. One scholar has argued that involving other extended family members in Head Start could have beneficial effects for both the child and the family.

4) Another important policy problem is how best to capitalize on cultural variations so that all children in Head Start receive the most benefits possible. Our evidence clearly indicates that one cannot ignore racial and cultural variation. While our data are not adequate to generate specific program proposals, we would argue that greater effort must be made to be sensitive to the cultural context in which these families live.

5) Finally, it is apparent that more research of the type outlined here is needed. Even the members of the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, the research group that documented the long-term advantages of pre-school programs for poor children, expressed concern that the only criterion used for measuring success was academic. Without expanded definitions of success and without further research to investigate them, Head Start could lose much of what it was intended to offer. Merely asking parents if they think things have improved is also not enough. A concerted effort needs to be made to develop methods for evaluating the broad range of Head Start goals. Only when one can consider the impact on the family, the social and emotional impact on the child, and the effect within each cultural community, as well as the impact on the child's academic success, can one begin to evaluate program effectiveness and assess the true social cost of excluding children of the poor from programs like Head Start. At this point, there is good reason to believe that involving parents in Head Start as coparticipants with their children, rather than simply as home-based teachers, fosters the type of family environment which helps the children most in the long run.

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Readers interested in a more detailed account of the study reported here will find a chapter by Leik, Chalkley, and Peterson ("The Impact of Head Start on Family Dynamics and Structure") in *Social Policy Implications for Families*, E. Anderson and R. Hula, editors (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1989). This research was funded by the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, with additional assistance from CURA. A second phase in this research, increasing the sample size by 140 new families and following some of those studied earlier now that the children are in primary school, will begin this year with funding from the Ford Foundation and additional assistance from CURA.

Photo on page 1 by John Fraser Hart.

Photos of the Hennepin County Municipal Solid Waste Incinerator on pages 6 and 9 by Judith Weir.

Photos on pages 11, 12, and 13 by Robert Friedman. Parents and children pictured here are from Parents in Community Action but are not those who were interviewed for this study.

New CURA Publications

Environmental Lead Risk in the Twin Cities. Howard W. Mielke and John L. Adams. 1989. CURA 89-4. 22 pp. Free.

Lead is an extremely toxic substance that has been used in large quantities in our technological society. Lead dust has accumulated in the soils of urban areas. The Urban Lead Mapping Project collected soil samples from parks, playgrounds, housesides, streetsides, and midyards in the Twin Cities. The resulting maps, showing the distribution of lead dust in this urban area, are the first of their kind. They show that lead content is highest in houseside soils, particularly in inner-city neighborhoods. Parks and playgrounds in the Twin Cities are quite safe in terms of lead risk. This monograph presents the maps and summary statistics from the Urban Lead Mapping Project along with a brief explanation of the dangers of exposure to lead.

Courses in Survey Research, University of Minnesota, 1989-90. July 1989. Minnesota Center for Survey Research. 19 pp. Free.

Many departments at the University offer courses that address methods of survey research. Those where at least 25 percent of the primary focus is on survey research are listed here. Listings are alphabetical by department and include course descriptions, teachers, quarters when the class will be offered, prerequisites, and the percent of the class devoted to survey research. Only classes on the Twin Cities campuses of the University are covered.

Courses on Aging, University of Minnesota, 1989-90. Monica Colberg. 1989. CURA 89-5. All-University Council on Aging. 23 pp. Free.

The University of Minnesota offers many courses related to aging. This is a listing of those courses in which aging is a primary focus. Courses are listed by campus (Twin Cities and the coordinate campuses) and by department. Listings are complete with course name, number, quarter offered, teacher, credits granted, prerequisites, and course description. Only the time and place are not given. Contact persons and phone numbers are listed for each department.

Courses on the Environment: A Student Guide to University of Minnesota Courses on Environmental Issues on the Twin Cities Campus, 1989-90. Margaret R. Wolfe. 1989. CURA 89-6. 49 pp. Free.

Courses relating to environmental studies at the University of Minnesota are listed by subject area and by department. Course descriptions are included. This publication is intended to be a guide for faculty and students and is supplemental to official University bulletins. An additional section describes special centers, services, and libraries that deal with the environment.